

# Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

## ESSEX, VERMONT

The Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction are overlapping municipalities grappling with how their futures fit together. For more than 50 years, residents of the two municipalities have debated the merits of merging or separating. Governing boards, committees, and municipal services coordinate to varying degrees, though many of these entities still function separately, including planning. Heart & Soul of Essex looked to find common ground. The question was not whether to merge or separate, but how to work together to lay the groundwork for an enduring future.

POPULATION:  
20,000

CHALLENGE:  
Civil discourse

FOCUS:  
Community  
engagement

KEY TOOL:  
Engagement  
activities

### Essex “by the numbers”:

- 2,000 residents participated in Heart & Soul Essex
- 40 two-hour neighborhood conversations hosted
- 350 residents participated in neighborhood conversations
- 2 times the 2016 Essex Town Plan won Plan of the Year (Vermont and Northern New England Chapters of American Planning Association)!

### Local conditions:

Separated centuries ago over the issue of village services, the town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction have remained distinct yet overlapping municipalities. Repeated attempts to merge the two have failed to win voter approval, and relations between town and village residents were sometimes factious.

Goals for Heart & Soul of Essex included:

- Fostering a culture that supports robust civic engagement and participation in local decision-making.
- Increasing coordination between municipal governments, planning and zoning commissions including integrated comprehensive plans.
- Creating an integrated planning t reflects what matters most to residents.

Heart & Soul of Essex created a culture of collaboration and participation that in many ways has shaped civic dialogue and action beyond the two-year project.

### Heart & Soul Outcomes:

Residents discovered that despite a wide variety of opinions and ideas, there are key aspects that matter most. These strongly shared themes were distilled into six core areas—local economy, health & recreation, community connections, education, thoughtful growth, and safety.

After the project was complete:

- A major merger of schools happened, smoothly and civilly, something school administrators said Community Heart Soul set the stage for.
- The Essex Town Plan, completed in 2016, was drafted with community input and included the town's Community Heart & Soul vision statement. The plan was awarded Plan of the Year by both the Vermont and Northern New England chapters of the American Planning Association.

*"The most important thing that the Community Heart & Soul project has done is create a connection among people. The people who are now connected are going to continue to work together."*

*– Vasanthi Meyette, Essex*